THE PEOPLES

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ABSTRACT

The peoples of the Coast form a very mixed population. The oldest inhabitants are the Cushitic speakers in the North: Orma, Boni, Sanye and Somali. They were displaced by Bantu speaking peoples who now form four clusters: Mijikenda, Pokomo, Taita and Swahili, who all claim origins from Shungwaya, the mythical heartland in the Tana-Juba region. The Swahili stand apart in important respects. They are not a clearly defined society but rather a group of merchants who have played the role of commercial leaders and organisers of other peoples in the region. Non-Swahili have generally accepted this hegemony and, in that sense, the Swahili encompass and define a larger coastal identity. The economic and social organisation of the Swahili, as an urban and Muslim community are discussed. Since the decline of the international commerce the importance of the Swahili has diminished and their former role taken over by the central government which regards the coastal peoples as marginal to modern Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

The peoples who occupy the coastal region of Kenya are united by three factors other than sharing a single geographical region: almost all of them belong to one language cluster (which extends outside the region); nearly all of them claim a common origin; and all of them have for many centuries been linked as members of a single oikumene based on trade (also extending beyond them). Kenya, like its neighbours Tanzania and Somalia, was a colonial creation with boundaries drawn for administrative convenience. Most of the region had earlier links, having been subject first to the Portuguese and later to the Omani Arab Sultanate of Zanzibar. This subjugation in itself forced a certain unity upon the peoples involved.

The centres of population are along the coast between Somalia and Tanzania, with a southern extension from the coast to the northern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, and a northern line of settlement along the Tana River. Apart from a few small groups of hunters in the north (and omitting the present-day movements of Somali into the north) most

of the interior portion is unoccupied except by occasional livestock keepers and the few small centres along the line of rail from Mombasa inland.

We need to distinguish, first, the indigenous occupants of the region from recent immigrants, and, secondly, the main clusters of the indigenous inhabitants themselves. The latter comprise two numerically unequal groupings: the Bantu-speaking majority and the small Cushitic-speaking minority, the latter in the very north of the region and the former throughout the remainder. There are also more recent immigrant groups ('recent' here going back perhaps five centuries, but most from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

Linguistically the situation is reasonably simple, although there remain many problems of detail. Most of the coastal people speak Bantu languages, of which the best known is KiSwahili, and all are closely related and have a common origin in the northern stretch of the coast. The Bantu-speaking peoples entered this region only in the middle centuries of the first millennium. It was occupied before that, as we know from several sources of which the clearest is perhaps the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a guide to the Indian Ocean written in Greek, during the first century AD. The writer or writers had clearly visited the area and told of Arab and other sailors sailing down the coast from Cape Guardafui as far as a permanent port named Rhapta, today thought to be in the area of Manda Bay and its settlements. There they traded with local people who spoke their 'own' language. These could only have been Cushitic speakers, still represented in the region by the Orma, the small hunting groups of Boni and Sanye, and of course the Somali. They were almost certainly pastoralists who offered certain items for trade such as hides and skins, horns and tusks, fragrances and perfumes and other commodities. These groups were overcome or ousted during the first millennium by incoming Bantu-speakers from the south-west and west. They brought knowledge of iron working and agriculture and lived in settled communities and produced more trade commodities than had their predecessors. The exact identity of these incomers cannot now be known.

Many later immigrant groups occupied Mombasa and the other coastal towns, some being found also inland as traders and neither considering themselves nor being considered by others as indigenous to the region. They include many long-standing communities from Arabia, Persia and the Indian subcontinent, the earlier comers being Muslims and the later Hindu. There are also immigrants from the Comoro Islands, who speak forms of KiSwahili and several categories of Europeans. And finally there are recent immigrants from up-country Kenya, mostly Luo and Kikuyu.

All these peoples have contributed in varying degrees to coastal and regional history. This has been based upon economy and trade as well as on differences in terms of demography and political power. The Kenya coastal region is part of a wider oikumene and this fact must always be taken into account. Only a few areas are rich enough to carry a dense population and produce a surplus for trade. These areas are parts of the coast and the land immediately behind it and in the south a wider zone between the coast and the northern slopes of Kilimanjaro. Farther south the country, now in Tanzania, has always been richer around the Shambala mountains and Mount Kilimanjaro itself, and of course in the islands of Pemba and Unguja (Zanzibar). Besides agricultural wealth there has been

wealth from hunting and pastoralism and throughout the last two millennia from mercantilism. The coast has been an area of middleman specialisation in long-distance commerce with the African interior and with the lands across the Indian Ocean. This commerce was controlled mainly by the larger coastal towns whose populations gradually became distinguished from the rest of the region, with the name of Swahili.

The indigenous population of the Kenya coastal region may be divided into various categories, defined by geographical residence, language and claimed places of origin, occupation and cultural behaviour. None of these are unchanging, as over history people have moved about the region and between it and neighbouring areas, have taken on new cultural and ethnic identities, have at times changed language or dialect, have developed new means of production and living and have decided to break away from existing groups to form new ones or have been absorbed by neighbours. Their histories are complex, often mutually contradictory, mythical and filled with symbols that must be interpreted according to local idiom; their time scales can only very rarely be relied upon if more than a lifetime back in time. Except for the Swahili, the Giriama, the Taita, and to a lesser extent the Digo, there have been few anthropological studies made of these peoples, and our knowledge of their internal organisations and cultures is usually inadequate and dated.

MAIN POPULATION GROUPS

The earliest inhabitants still represented in the region today are the Southern Cushitic-speaking hunting and gathering people known as Boni and Sanye, the former living inland from the Lamu archipelago and the latter south of the lower reaches of the Tana (see Figure 1). They appear once to have been pastoralists who lost their livestock and resorted to foraging in the arid backlands of the northern coast. Today they number only a few hundred but in the past they supplied much of the ivory for the Indian Ocean trade. Like other Cushites they practise female infibulation, but little is known about them and they are in general despised by their Bantu and Somali neighbours. Today they are virtually ignored by development and aid programmes. Along the Kenya-Ethiopian border there are semi-nomadic populations mainly the Southern Cushitic-speaking Orma of the wider Oromo cluster. Recent intruders are groups of Somali who have moved into north-eastern Kenya during the last decades.

The three main Bantu-speaking clusters are those of the coast itself, the immediate hinterland, and the southern inland hills. They comprise the Mijikenda, Pokomo, Taita and Swahili. Mijikenda (the 'nine towns') is a recent name for a cluster of people who until the late 1930s saw themselves as nine discrete groups and then for political reasons chose the new name. They are usually divided into the southern Mijikenda, comprising the Digo, Duruma, and various subgroups affiliated to them, and the northern Mijikenda, of which the largest are the Giriama, with the smaller groups called Rabai, Dzihana (Jibana), Kambe[1], Kauma, Chonyi, and Rihe (Ribe). Most live just behind the narrow

1. Not to be confused with the people called Kamba who live inland outside the region.

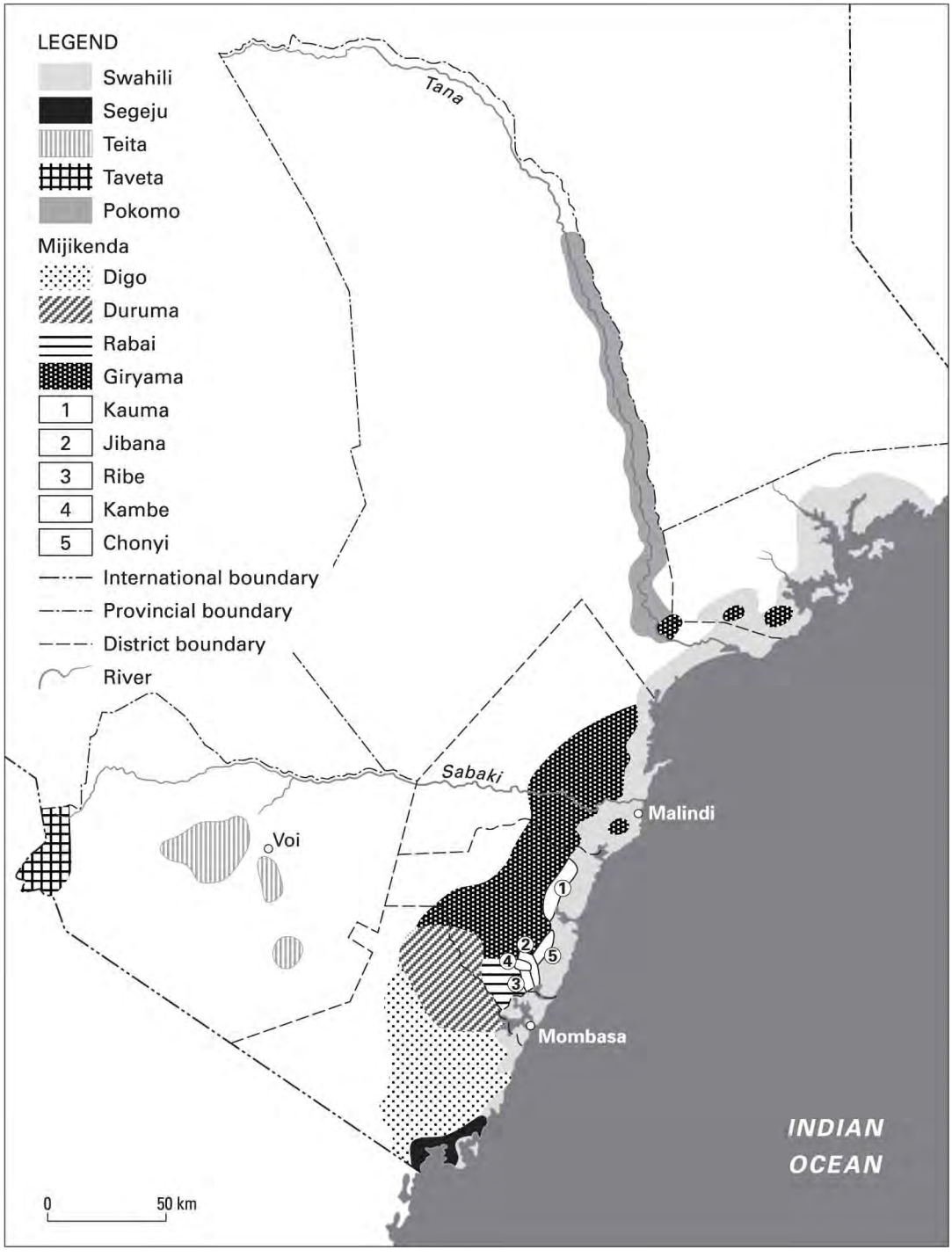

Figure 1 Geographical distribution of the original ethnic groups
(After Prins 1952)

coast itself and extend several miles inland; most Digo and Duruma today still live inland. Often included is the group known as Segeju, who live on the coast south of Mombasa and whose linguistic and migratory history is different from that of the others. All these peoples trace their origins to the mythical heartland known as Shungwaya. It is generally accepted today that this refers to an area somewhere in the Tana-Juba region of the far northern coast: it may have been a series of actual societies or only a mythical entity. Whatever it may have been in history, the idea of Shungwaya provides a common origin for the coastal peoples.

All the Mijikenda groups reckon patrilineal descent except for the matrilineal Digo and the double-descent Duruma. All groups lack centralised political organisation, and have traditionally been ruled by various complex forms of age-groupings and generation-sets that are today of little importance except for organising the individual life-cycles of members. The Segeju live in large walled villages but the remainder in small compact settlements. Each Mijikenda sub-group recognises its fortified ritual settlement known as *kaya*. Today most *kaya*, situated on the tops of hills and once heavily stockaded and protected, are little used and at times not even visited, but formerly they were powerful and effective places of local rule and ritual, the foci of local identities.

The Mijikenda are mostly farmers and coconut growers, growing a wide range of subsistence and modern cash crops; the Giriama have long supplied Mombasa with foodstuffs, and the Duruma still supply milk to the city. Local markets are found throughout the area and in the past there were also a few large markets that dealt with commodities for the Indian Ocean trade, the main one being ivory. The Mijikenda have for centuries been focused economically on Mombasa and the smaller towns of the coast such as Malindi. Only the Segeju and Digo appear to have adopted Islam before the present day; many have become Christian and others retain their indigenous religions.

The second Bantu-speaking group is the cluster of people known as Pokomo, who inhabit the Tana valley. They comprise several subgroups: the Malachini of the Lower Pokomo, various smaller groups farther upstream, beyond them the Elwana or Malakote, and beyond the town of Garissa the Korokoro. These groups speak various languages and dialects, have rarely adopted either Islam or Christianity, and are principally fishermen and rice growers. They have played relatively little part in the history of the Coast itself.

The third main Bantu-speaking cluster is that of the Taita, who occupy the Taita Hills that rise from the arid Maasai plains around them on north, west, and east; to the south the hilly country extends into the hills of north-eastern Tanzania occupied by the Chagga, Pare and Shambala. The Taita are agriculturists, although they keep some livestock if they can, for social uses in marriage and rituals. The main crop is maize, with other grains, legumes, some rice and other crops. They practise both dry and irrigation farming and produce enough to export surplus to Mombasa and the Coast via the railways that pass just to their north and south-east, meeting at Voi. They have long been involved in trade, especially in the caravan trade between coast and interior and also with the southern peoples of Pare and Chagga. The Taita comprise seven main clans whose members recognise marked differences of immigration to the hills, but all, like the Mijikenda and Pokomo, claim to have come originally from Shungwaya. The main Taita groups refer to

themselves as Dabida and they and smaller groups between them speak three mutually unintelligible languages. Their sense of unity comes from occupying the Taita Hills and their common descent from Shungwaya. Centuries of intermarriage, sharing of age-groups and very similar cultural features have strengthened their sense of unity.

To the south of the Taita Hills live the Taveta, a small group occupying what is essentially an oasis protected by forests. They are more closely linked to the Pare than to the Taita. In the nineteenth century they provided a large and safe caravanserai between the interior and the coast. Caravans could rest safely, break goods and victual on their way to and from the Maasai country to the north and west.

Finally there are the Swahili. Linguistically and ethnically related to the other Bantu-speakers mentioned above, they stand apart in several important respects. They differ in dialect, cultural behaviour, religion and education, occupation, places of residence and forms of internal stratification. The name Swahili (properly WaSwahili, the plural form) has long been given to them by outsiders but has been little used by the people themselves. It comes from the Arabic *sawahil*, 'coast' or 'margin', and was used in a derogatory sense by the Omani Arabs who established the Sultanate of Zanzibar in the early eighteenth century. The language, KiSwahili, has been used in several dialect forms along the coast for many centuries: in recent years it has become the lingua franca throughout Eastern and Central Africa. The use of this name has the implication that the 'Swahili' are a clearly bounded society with a clearly definable ethnicity, but throughout history there has been continual shifting of identity. At any one time and in any one place local people know who are meant by the name, but usage changes frequently. Also, throughout past centuries and to a large extent today, the peoples of the region have accepted their cultural hegemony. In that sense, the Swahili encompass and define a wider coastal identity.

THE SWAHILI

Formerly it was thought that the Swahili originated in Arabia and that they were formed by immigrant Arabs and other Asians, who established what were essentially Arab creole communities that inherently possessed greater skills than those of the indigenous population. Certainly the Swahili merchants claimed this origin for themselves and during the Sultanate of Zanzibar this claim became economically and politically more advantageous than before. However, recent research has shown that Swahili identity is basically an African one, although much in their culture originated in Arabia and India. Swahili merchants claimed kinship with trading partners from across the Ocean. Since they kept slaves from the African interior they wished to distinguish themselves from their captives and servants. Nonetheless, some families did come from Arabia and it is these who are known as 'Arabs', although they have long been physically mingled. These include the clans known as Mazrui and Nabhany, and many Sharifu families. The link to Arabia is more cultural and religious than a physical one. Many Swahili claim descent from Shiraz, in the former Persia, to claim an older Asian ancestry than that in Arabia, but this claim is historically invalid. Rather, the place of origin was Shungwaya in the north, the mythical homeland of Swahili and Mijikenda. Those of known slave ancestry may be referred to as

wazalia (those born in the country), although the term is somewhat derogatory.

The Swahili coast covers a thousand-mile of coastline from, what were once Swahili towns, Mogadishu, Brava, and Kismayu in Somalia to the islands of Mozambique, with the adjoining islands of Unguja (Zanzibar), Pemba, Mafia and the Comoros. There are a few Swahili settlements inland near to Lake Tanganyika, and there are enclaves of Swahili in Nairobi and other towns in eastern and central Africa. The Swahili who live on the coast and islands number between 300,000 and 500,000, of whom a third live in Kenya. The latter are therefore only a part of a wider society. The Swahili name themselves by their towns: those of Lamu are the WaAmu and those of Malindi the WaMalindi, for example. Some Swahili groups do use 'ethnic' names such as the Bajun of the northern Kenya coast and farther south the Hadimu and Tumbatu of Zanzibar Island. These many terms shift over time, and past censuses have shown sudden changes in nomenclature and population.

The Swahili settlements extend in a line along the coast and in most places are interspersed with settlements of non-Swahili: the Mijikenda and Boni in Kenya and in Tanzania the Zaramo, Bondei, Doe, Yao and many others. Almost all their settlements are sited on the lee sides of islets set in creeks or on the banks of creeks and rivers; some are inland but few lie more than a mile or two from the coastline. Almost all settlements are ports, providing safe harbours, and most settlements are opposite openings in the reef wide and deep enough for sailing ships. In addition, they are places from which there are routes connecting the interior, either overland or by river.

Today, the Swahili are neither commercial nor political leaders of coastal society, as they once were. Their significance lies essentially in that they have for centuries defined the values of coastal society: their literate civilisation and Islamic leadership have been seen as forming the epitome of social behaviour and others have emulated them as far as they have been able to do so. Even today, when the materialism of new elites is becoming paramount, at least lip-service is paid to Swahili values. Although not aristocrats in a conventional sense, they have performed many of the cultural and historical roles of aristocrats and to understand coastal and regional society one must appreciate their historical standing and influence.

THE OIKUMENE

Until very recently the Coast formed a single oikumene, without any overall centralisation (except during the period of Zanzibari overrule). The Swahili have long been literate, wealthy and powerful merchants and have played the role of commercial leaders and organisers of the other peoples of the region. The world links of the Swahili merchants have always been wider than those of the other groups, their culture has been a richer one in the sense of being associated with greater wealth and wider relations with the outside and being Muslim has meant being a member of a world religious community and having a deeper sense of history and philosophy. Indeed many of the non-Swahili groups have in various ways and for various reasons accepted the economic and cultural hegemony of the Swahili.

The economic basis for Swahili dominance has been the local production of crops and fish, together with the main commodities for export across the Indian Ocean. The crops of the region include – and appear to have long included – basic subsistence crops such as millets and sorghums, in some areas rice and many legumes and other food plants, especially valuable being the coconut. Inland, livestock has provided food, along the coast fish. Because of their unique position in respect of long-distance commerce, other products have been important for many centuries: ivory, teeth, hides and skins, timber, iron, gums and fragrances and countless other items, some wild and others grown in gardens. Throughout most of eastern Africa peoples have grown mainly subsistence crops and some cash or export crops and products, with the emphasis on the former. The coastal and regional economy has always centred more around the requirements of the coastal trading towns. In recent years this situation has been exacerbated by the growth of Mombasa.

Despite cultural and other variations every group in the region has for centuries been engaged, to varying degrees and in varying ways, with a wider trade than the local exchanges of petty surpluses of food or craft objects. They have lain across caravan routes between the coast and the interior and held varying degrees of control over them. The inland groups have also performed the role of protectors against the threats of peoples of the interior, especially the Maasai. As intermediaries some of the trade profits naturally came to them and they have been able to hold some coastal merchants to ransom if they had not paid a fair recompense.

This long-lasting commerce was based, as has been all colonialist exploitation of Africa, on the exchange of unprocessed materials for manufactured consumer goods coming from Asia and Europe. The unprocessed materials from the interior included ivory, slaves, gold, iron, incense, spices, rock crystal, grains, timber, rhinoceros horn, animal skins and an array of less important materials such as orchella and dyes. The manufactured commodities brought into eastern Africa included beads, textiles of many kinds, porcelain, arms and ammunition, bullion and many lesser consumer goods. The trade affected both the interior and the coastal region in important ways. It denuded the interior of much of its population of humans and elephants and caused stagnation of the indigenous economies. It also led to the aggrandisement of local political leaders who organised the actual capture of slaves and animals. In the coastal region itself it resulted in changes in the distribution of power and wealth with the emergence of local entrepreneurs who profited from the caravan commerce that passed through their territories. Most of this commerce has ended, to be replaced by the exchange of local amenities and foodstuffs. The profits of the tourist industry have gone mostly to non-Swahili entrepreneurs, an even greater inequality of exchange than in earlier colonial days.

The forms that these trade relations have taken in past centuries still persist to some extent today. Relations of military force have been few, although there have been occasions when all these groups had to stand and fight for their position and their rights. But trade, politics and warfare do not fit together well, and other means were used to tie them together. Trade has been central, in that virtually every group has been able to provide something desired by others: salt, iron, ivory, cattle, and women would seem to have been the more important. The distribution of the first four of these items has been dis-

persed, with only a few reliable centres for each. And only a few peoples have ever had enough children to enable them to trade daughters with other peoples, even when the men felt it necessary for the sake of continued well-being of the group. Every fertile, watered and hilly area (the latter being defensible) have been and are occupied by settlements. Together they have had the ability to defend the region against military and economic intrusion by Maasai and others. For example, the Kamba have tried for centuries to enter the region in large numbers but have been unable to find anywhere to live, as suitable habitats have long been settled and vigorously guarded.

There have long been other ties than those of mutual defence between the Swahili, their neighbours and the trading partners of the interior. Intermarriage seems never to have been widespread: differences of local and clan custom and morality are everywhere important and not easily disturbed by marriage with outsiders of different custom and morality. Kinship is, after all, defined by descent from a common ancestor and has rarely spread over intergroup boundaries. But ties of quasi- or pseudo-kinship are different, and ties of blood brotherhood have been reported between traders and caravan guides and the local populations among whom they had to pass. Also ties of *utani* (usually translated as 'joking relations') have been widely reported both between individuals and between entire groups. They are obviously ideal for interaction between traders and travellers and their hosts. A third type of relationship, reported rarely except by older Swahili of merchant families, were forms of concubinage, a coastal trader being given a daughter of a local chief through whose territory he was passing and would pass again. This was not marriage, except in a few cases farther south in central Tanganyika where, for example, Arab and Swahili traders married daughters of local chiefs and so became sons-in-law. Where custom forbade marriage, concubinage was an alternative, formal and recognised and not a mere affair of brief sexual encounter.

THE SWAHILI AND THEIR TOWNS

Until recent years the entire coastal region of Kenya has in a very real sense depended upon the existence, economy, and social activities of the Swahili in their towns. The mercantile role and organisation of these African towns is certainly a cogent factor in understanding the history and present situation of the entire coastal region including the non-Swahili peoples. Although the commerce has in general originated outside the eastern African coast itself (there have been exceptions such as mangrove poles), it all passed through the hands of the Swahili who built up the necessary skills and organisation. The Swahili did build up and run efficient ports-of-trade and this has been their raison d'etre. Ports-of-trade provided safe harbours where ships could be repaired and sheltered, victualled and watered; where their crews could be fed and rested; where goods could be stored and exchanged; where credit and cash could be obtained; where merchants from the ships could trade safely with their partners on shore. The Swahili merchants arranged for the exchange and preparation of commodities, ensured that goods needed for export to Asia were parcelled and ready for the monsoons and that those needed for the interior would likewise be ready when the caravan seasons began. They acted as intermediaries

who could interpret, in the widest senses, between culturally and linguistically diverse traders, and whose word and credit could be trusted while at the same time taking a fair reward. These skills were learned over many centuries, and the Swahili merchants built up a unique civilisation.

Still, the Swahili have never formed a single polity as such: competition for trade has prevented economic unity, and they have formed a congeries of related and competitive settlements. They have been middlemen merchants rather than ocean or caravan traders. They did not themselves venture into the interior, the caravans being in the hands of specialists, mostly Kamba, except at the time when the Zanzibar Sultanate became deeply engaged in the slave trade during the nineteenth century and used Swahili as members of their caravans.

The Swahili are an urban people, living in distinct settlements in which the greatest values are those of civilisation *(ustaarabu* literally 'continual and ordered residence') and urbanity *(utamaduni).* They are different from the settlements of their neighbours and vary among themselves in appearance, size, composition, and function, but all are known as towns *(miji)* and share the same basic structure. In Kenya there are two main categories, which may be called Stone-towns and Country-towns. Many settlements have features of both, and over history many have changed from one category to the other depending on the mercantile and political situation of the time.

Stone-towns are today considered the main 'Swahili' places. They are composed of square-built 'stone' houses (the 'stone' being coral block) set in narrow streets and alleys and lasting up to two or three hundred years.[2] In a few places houses have two or even three stories. Some towns had surrounding walls, both for protection and symbolically to separate themselves from settlements belonging to non-Swahili; today many are in ruins. The houses are of a unique architecture that is found nowhere else and that can be traced as far back in time as the ninth and tenth century towns such as Shanga, Ungwana or Gedi. Their central buildings are mosques, one of which is the central or congregational ('Friday') mosque. Country-towns have square-built houses of impermanent materials (palm leaf matting, mud and wattle), have no surrounding walls and are less densely built up. They appear more like large rural villages, even though they usually contain a few permanent buildings, particularly a central mosque.

The stone-towns held the merchants and their mercantile activities, concentrating on the ocean and interior trades, organising them, taking profit from them, and considering themselves, as pious Muslim merchants, as culturally distinct from and as morally superior to everyone else. The merchants traded in slaves and kept slaves themselves until the abolition of slavery. Slaves were used as domestic servants but most were field workers on the mainland plantations, used mainly for sorghum and sesame which were shipped to Arabia, where grain is scarcely grown. The stone-town populations grew certain food items such as fruit, tamarind, tobacco, betel and others, but not the staple crops. Most of their food has been produced by the country-towns, as well as by the Mijikenda. Today

2. These are distinct from the so-called 'Swahili houses' of many coastal communities which are merely square and not necessarily Swahili at all.

much of it is produced by immigrant farmers who have been allotted Swahili lands as part of resettlement schemes.

All Swahili towns are divided in two territorial groupings, the moieties *(mitaa)*, that provided the pre-colonial form of government, control being in the hands of the moieties in alternation. Almost all stone-towns were at one time under the nominal authority of kings and queens, now long vanished. Moieties are still important, there being many forms of competition and antagonism recognised between them and played out in football matches, ritual fighting at the New Year and poetry competitions; but their governmental functions have disappeared with the introduction of modern town councils and central government bureaucracies. Towns are also divided into wards or quarters, likewise known as *mitaa*, but in the stone-towns wards are merely local areas or addresses without any governmental functions.

SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Notions of hierarchy and ancestry are important in Swahili society, to a far greater extent than among the other groups of the region. The merchants of the stone-towns are organised into what may be called subclans, patrilineal groups that claim relationship to clans in southern Arabia that are also represented in other stone-towns along the coast. Each stone-town has a slightly different set of subclans, there being a total of three or four dozen such groups in all. They are typically divided into lineages, which are corporate house-owning groups that formed the business houses that organised the intercontinental commerce. Today, with little of the commerce remaining, these groups have lost much of their significance, but membership in them remains important, especially in the arrangement of marriages. The reckoning of patrilineal descent is found in most of the northern stone-towns of the Kenya coast, but in Mombasa and some other towns many merchant families practice cognatic descent, a preference perhaps linked to a traditional difference in the identity of merchants who in Mombasa were largely Indian and Omani rather than Swahili.

The Swahili have been and are merchants for whom rights in property are of many kinds and crucial factors in everyday life. They include those in land and stretches of sea, buildings, ships, many items of commerce as well as in Islamic knowledge, poetic skills and other immaterial property. Buildings – dwelling houses and many mosques – are built and owned by lineages. These buildings may be large and of permanent materials, the physical signs of lineage wealth, status and piety. Both are typically entailed under the Islamic institution of *waqf*, by which the owner entails the property forever either for a category of people (as for his descendants or freed slaves) or for charity.

The Swahili merchants are traditionally known as *waungwana*, usually translated as 'patricians'. These are urban merchants not landed aristocrats; when they did own plantations worked by slave labour, these were used for commercial purposes and although they brought profit to their owners, they did not play the part of landed property owned by rural aristocrats elsewhere. Patrician subclans are found dispersed among the stone-towns. Those subclans that do not or cannot claim Arabian immigrant origins are typi-

cally given lower prestige.

The Kenya patricians owned slaves until l907. These were used as domestic and field labourers, and as concubines. Offspring fathered by the owners were considered legally free and equal in rank to their siblings by free patrician women. The abolition of slavery legally meant that all were equal, but since few were given land most remained attached to their former owners' families. Many became wealthy (especially by opening plantations of their own near Malindi and Witu) and links between them and patricians have often been strong. Women especially have together formed many kinds of social and religious associations.

All Swahili are Muslim and forms of ethnic, personal and moral purity, *usafi*, are of central importance in claiming and retaining Swahili identity. Purity implies both Islamic orthodoxy and belonging to the world of 'civilisation' and 'urbanity'. Purity is considered to be a quality of women. Men may be given *heshima* ('reputation', 'honour' or 'respect'), that accrues to them by virtue of the purity of their wives, mothers and sisters as well as by the probity of their commercial lives and their Muslim devotion. Purity is made overt and public at marriage, but only first-born patrician daughters are considered, traditionally at least, to hold true purity. Patrician marriages are the most important rituals of Swahili society. The general rule is that subclans are endogamous, that marriage should be between those of the same rank and between parallel patrilineal cousins and between cross cousins. A first-born daughter should marry her father's closest brother's son, he who had been chosen to succeed her father as head of the lineage business. Marital residence should be uxorilocal (in which the husband goes to reside with his wife's group) in the house of the bride's parents in which she is given rights of residence but which, as typically entailed under *waqf*, cannot be disposed of by her but should be given to her eldest daughter in turn. Later-born daughters should properly be married to and reside virilocally with other sons of the sub-clan, which is an endogamous unit. This system ensures that business and property ownership remains within the same lineage from one generation to another.

Marriage payments are exchanged between the parties concerned. The legal Islamic transfer of bride wealth is observed, the amount being generally small. In addition, the groom transfers as large a sum of money as he can to the bride's father, who uses it for the costs of the wedding and also adds to it to transfer a dowry to the bride. The other main marriage practice concerns the notions of purity and honour or reputation. A patrician bride, especially a first-born daughter, is given purity at her wedding, principally by being shown to be a virgin. Today the weddings of wealthy people, in particular those of Hadhrami and Omani ancestry, have become extremely costly and ostentatious and use some of the idioms of the patrician weddings which remain a model to be emulated. But here the notion of purity plays less part: wealth matters more.

The Swahili are Sunni Muslims and expression of Islamic orthodoxy, scholarship and devotion give both men and women high social prestige. The linked literary skills, in particular that of composing the extremely elaborate forms of Swahili poetry, are counted highly. They are open to both men and women and formerly to favoured slaves; many of the most famous Swahili poets have been women. These skills remain important today at

weddings and in radio and television broadcasting.

Throughout Swahili Islam runs the problem of the complementarity of orthodox practice, *dini*, and the less orthodox elements of more local and African origin, *mila*, which are centered upon healing and possession cults, the latter in particular joined by women. Many of the same elements, especially spirit possession, are also found among non-Muslim neighbours, making for close cultural links between them (although frowned upon by the devout). But the practices of *mila* are as integral to Swahili religion as the more orthodox practices observed in the mosques and *madrasa*, the Islamic schools. Muslim reformers and innovators have long been active and influential in Swahili Islam, especially during the Zanzibar Sultanate in the second half of the nineteenth century. Today, many reformers from Kuwait, Iran, and elsewhere have tried to infiltrate the coastal towns. In addition, recent political activity has been led by Swahili religious leaders in opposition to the rule of the central government.

RECENT REGIONAL CHANGES

The international commerce came to an end with the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery in 1907, which destroyed both a profitable export enterprise and also the former supply of labour. In recent years the mercantile role of the Swahili has almost vanished in the face of external competition. Some Swahili still trade with Somalia, southern Arabia and Madagascar, sending mangrove poles and tobacco to these countries. Many of their former grain plantations on the mainland have been taken for national settlement schemes and their present economic and mercantile role is limited to petty production and local exchange. The Swahili have played little part in modern industrialization and their traditional mercantile role is of little importance in modern Kenya. Their organisations and skills persist; but they are put to little use and are wasted in the Kenya of today where they could in fact be of immense value.

During the twentieth century several important events have led to marked changes in both the occupations and cultures of all these groups and in their places in the total economy and political system of the coastal region. The most important have been the imposition of British colonial rule and the later Independence of the Republic of Kenya; the abolition of slavery in 1907; the decline of the Swahili-controlled ocean trade; the coming of international and state trading and tourist companies; and the lack of concern for and development of the Coast.

Locally, the more immediate events were those that affected the subsistence, local exchange and plantation economy of the coast. Although the Swahili had held large plantations worked by slave labour and used slaves to gather mangrove timber, many of the Mijikenda groups had also held some slaves, certainly in small numbers but nonetheless of productive value both as field and domestic workers and as child-bearing women for their owners. Most of the Mijikenda groups had for centuries acted as trade intermediaries for the Swahili towns: the Swahili had recognised their value and had never enslaved them. They saw themselves, as they still do, as socially dependent upon the Swahili. They also saw themselves as culturally linked in the sense that their local elites

could always acquire high status by becoming as close to being 'Swahili' as possible. To become a Swahili involved much more than merely adopting Islam. It involved having wealth, being engaged in some form of trade, possibly becoming a learned Muslim scholar (although this seems to have been very rare), in adopting Swahili clothing, housing, cuisine and cultural traits generally; but it also involved possessing the 'correct' ancestry. Non-Swahili could acquire the other criteria, to greater or lesser degree, but they could never acquire the latter. Mijikenda could acquire patron-client ties with the Swahili of Mombasa and Malindi, in particular, as intermediaries between the Swahili and the interior merchants, by supplying the towns with food, and having representatives in the indigenous town government of Mombasa. These relations continued until after the Second World War, when most were taken over, often forcibly, by new enterprises supported and often funded by central government agencies; the profits went to non-coastal businessmen. The Kikuyu and others were also given Mijikenda and Swahili lands for resettlement, without compensation or apparent care for the local peoples.

The building of the modern port of Kilindini, and of the Kenya and Uganda railway from Mombasa, have had immense impact. Mombasa has been a port for centuries i.e. the so-called Old Port guarded by Fort Jesus and only suitable for sailing vessels. With the coming of large steam ships the newer port of Kilindini, linked to the new railway system, changed the nature of Mombasa. The modern trade bypassed the Old Port and the former densely settled areas of the island; and it needed far more labour than the local peoples could or were willing to supply. Immigrant labour from the interior filled this gap. This led to the impoverishment of local uneducated and unskilled groups, their having few links with this new commerce and the industry that was part of it, and to continual antagonism between local and immigrant workers. Local labour continued to work Old Port but the levels of shipping and commerce that went through it have steadily declined.

As Mombasa grew into a modern port-city, its administration was taken out of the hands of indigenous political groups. The Swahili in particular found that control of what had so long been their own town was taken away from them and their interests little cared for. During the twentieth century there grew an ever-increasing division of interest between local and immigrant, Muslim and non-Muslim, and traditional ties and obligations versus imported notions of relationship and obligation. The Swahili, in particular, were increasingly marginalized and considered old-fashioned and unsuited to modern urban life; again, a waste of skills and talents that has cost Kenya dear. The growth of Mombasa has led to the growth of modern organisations such as trade unions and many incipient political parties. The needs of immigrant labour for housing, entertainment and other facilities have affected more traditional Swahili and Mijikenda forms of settlement as well as market exchange, family networks, roles of women, education, and religious organisations and cults.

Politically, last century has seen immense changes, from a complex of small, culturally autonomous peoples to a single regional cluster administered by non-local officers many of whom have shown little interest in their charges, seeing them merely as marginal constituents. Political power in the new state of Kenya is concentrated in certain ethnic

groups at the centre. This situation is hardly unique to this part of Africa, of course, but every such region shows different and distinctive characteristics of change. On the Kenya coast the unique factor (or almost so) is that of Islam. During last century, and increasingly in recent years, there has been a discrepancy between the 'traditional' Swahili system of ranking and that of the modern commercial and industrial world. This has been due to economic rather than to cultural and religious criteria. For example, the Hadhrami are Muslims and reckoned as Swahili but often accept the overriding importance of commercial wealth rather than traditional Swahili values.

In recent years the coastal region has been gravely affected by the steady population movement south from Somalia in the north. For centuries there have been Somali resident in the former Northern Frontier District. But from the middle years of last century there have been large incursions of armed Somali into the northern parts of the coast. These have included 'shifta', armed bandits who have pushed the Bajun out of their traditional island and coastal homelands; they have been forced southwards as impoverished labour migrants. The recent wars in Somalia have further resulted in large numbers of Somali refugees fleeing into Kenya. Some of these have been wealthy and have bought land and property along the coast, to the harm and annoyance of the local inhabitants, while others have been themselves poor and unskilled and have been allowed – or forced – to stay in makeshift refugee camps behind the coast itself with little hope of employment. They remain, usually regarded as a threat to the future livelihood of Swahili and Mijikenda.

CONCLUSION

Swahili and non-Swahili groups are traditionally autonomous units, part of a wider oikumene stretching along the entire coastline and offshore islands and extending into the immediate hinterland. It is a social system unlike any other in eastern Africa (if not all Africa) which has been dependent upon a middleman position in the African-Asian commerce. It is significant that structurally similar societies are found in parts of western India and in Indonesia, all once engaged in intercontinental commerce.

The present position of the coastal peoples is one of uncertainty. The colonial administrations at first worked together with the Swahili to administer their territories but soon forsook them in favour of staff from inland regions. The latter had usually received Christian education while the Swahili were left to themselves in what was to become an economic backwater (urban centres such as Mombasa and Dar es Salaam became largely non-Swahili and non-Muslim). The central government has come to regard the Swahili and the other coastal peoples as marginal to modern Kenya. The coastal groups have tried to partake in national politics by forming interest groups and political parties, of which the largest was known as Mwambao, but with little success. The Swahili, in particular, are fully aware of their declining position in the modern world, despite their centuries-old ties to the wider world of commerce and Islam. Their pride in their unique civilisation gives them the courage to continue in what they see as an often hostile world.

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3. A comprehensive bibliography is included in Middleton (1992).

REVIEW DETAILS

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